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ABSTRACT

Most data support the thesis of declining civic engagement among Generations X and Y. If levels of civic engagement remain depressed across the life cycles of Generations X and Y, U.S. democracy may be threatened, for there will be fewer engaged people to fulfill the obligations of democratic citizens. The hope is that youths' indifference to politics will change as they mature. This paper presents a portrait of these generations based on available cross-sectional data. The paper explores Generations X and Y's political knowledge and political participation and their political attitudes and values. Research suggests that, in contrast to previous U.S. generations, young people today have fewer opportunities to practice politics in high school student government (Highton and Wolfinger, 2001). The data provide some basis for the charge that youth bear responsibility in part for the decline in U.S. social capital. There are some significant differences between Generations X and Y and previous generations. For example, Generations X and Y possess less information about public affairs and are less interested in politics. Data presented here capture Generations X and Y at the low point of their projected life cycle of political engagement. The paper calls for more studies, especially longitudinal, to determine which factors will motivate Generations X and Y to engage in politics. Contains 9 tables and 20 references. (BT)

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Will They Engage?
Political Knowledge, Participation and Attitudes of Generations X and Y

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Paper Prepared for the 2001 German and American Conference,
"Active Participation or a Retreat to Privacy."

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Introduction

In the United States, and perhaps around the world, there is a long tradition of disparaging the selfish behavior of youth. In 1959, a writer charged youth with having "only one conviction: that the only answer they can make is distrust. They have no ardor except for the tentative safety of the quiet suburb, an orthodoxy of indifference. They have only an overriding fear of commitment and a will to be let alone."[1] Does this sound familiar? Young Americans today stand accused of "political disengagement." They are the main culprits in narratives on the decline of social capital in America. This paper will investigate the political knowledge, participation, and attitudes of youth to determine if this charge has any basis.

First, how shall we define youth? The part of an American's life-cycle relatively free of "adult" responsibilities (bearing children, working full time, owning homes, settling in one community) has expanded. Young people often postpone assuming responsibilities associated with adulthood well into their thirties. Correspondingly, this study will look at two political cohorts: First, those born between 1965 and 1978, known in the literature as "Generation X," the oldest of whom are in their midthirties; second, "Generation Y," which includes those born after 1978, and whose oldest members are twenty-three. Generation Y is important for no other reason than its size; 70 million Americans, of increasing ethnic diversity, were born after 1978. This is the largest generation of young people in our country's history (New Millennium Project 1999, 10).

Until the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Generations X and Y experienced few defining historic moments. They were raised in a time of relative peace and prosperity in the United States, perhaps lessening the need for immediate political action. The political ethos during their lifetimes has been characterized by declining political engagement. Widespread social movements have petered out. Single-issue advocacy groups now dominate the political scene. Many parents of these cohorts proved to be poor political role models. On average, they turned out to vote only 50% of the time in presidential elections, and 35% in off-year elections.

[1] "Our Quiet Young," **Christian Century** 76 (11 July 1959), 664. Quoted in Schlozman, Verba, Brady, and Erkulwater (1998) "Why Can't They Be Like We Were?: Understanding the Generation Gap in Participation."

Party affiliations waned and many citizens registered as "Independents." Media focused largely on entertainment and scandal, at the expense of in-depth analysis of political issues. Political parties gave way to candidate centered elections, which require individuals to possess higher levels of knowledge. Political campaigns tended to rely increasingly on professionals rather than volunteers. Money, a resource unavailable to youth, increased in importance as campaign spending hit record highs. From a rational choice perspective, the structure and processes of politics in America today may not invite, nor even require an individuals' political participation. The majority of young Americans receive few direct appeals to their self-interest from candidates, participate very little in any stage of the political process, and continue to be ignored by policymakers.

It should not surprise us then, that most data support the thesis of declining civic engagement among Generations X and Y. Will low civic engagement at this age depress participation over the political life cycles of these generations? The answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper. If levels of civic engagement remain depressed across the life cycles of Generations X and Y, democracy may be threatened, for there will be fewer Americans to fulfill the obligations of democratic citizens. Declines in participation have also resulted in greater societal inequalities, eventually undermining democracy. The hope is that youths' indifference to politics will change as they mature. This paper presents a portrait of these generations based on available cross-sectional data.

Political Knowledge

Let us begin with the supposition that "democratic citizens should have a minimum understanding of the political system in which they express preferences and elect representatives" (Niemi and Junn 1998, 1). Governments operate "more democratically as the range and depth of information held by citizens increases and as the distribution of knowledge becomes more equitable" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 17). Despite rising levels of education, the public's level of political knowledge is nearly the same as it was sixty years ago. This puzzles observers because there is a strong positive relationship between political knowledge and levels of education. Indeed, gaps in levels

of political knowledge have also remained relatively stable across groups, despite progress for blacks and women. Knowledge levels of women, minorities, and those of low socioeconomic status are about the same as they were in the 1950s and 1960s (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 162-163). Young adults are even less well informed than older Americans (159).

One of the best current sources of data on American youth is a study conducted in November of 1998 of 15-24 year-olds by the National Association of Secretaries of State. The sample studied consists largely of Generation Y, with a few older cohorts part of Generation X. In their study, Generation Y was found to have only a vague understanding of what it means to be a citizen in a democratic society (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999, 17). While half of the respondents gave the top rating ("10") to "being an American," few could offer a response to define what that means. "Citizenship is to enjoy the rights that our country has to offer," responded one person. "Citizenship is freedom of speech, right to vote, right to bear arms, religion, property and privacy…" said another (New Millennium Project 35). Rights, better understood than responsibilities, tend to cluster around vague notions of "helping others" and "being a good person" (35). This cohort has not thought deeply about its' responsibilities or opportunities as citizens.

This has not prevented Generation Y from entering American universities with record levels of academic self-confidence; 60% rated themselves "above average" or "top 10% (The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1999, 5). Academic self-confidence may stem from grade inflation, which has also reached record levels, rather than knowledge levels. Evidence suggests Generations X and Y are less informed on public affairs. The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 75% of high school seniors were not "proficient" in civics, although most do possess basic knowledge about democratic government. Twenty-five percent for instance, could not identify two ways the Constitution prevents any president from becoming a dictator. Only 9% of seniors could list two ways a democratic society can benefit if citizens take part. Only 30% understood that the power of judicial review may protect individual's rights. Fifty-two percent understood that the UN Declaration of Human Rights has been opposed by some Americans due to fear that this will force the U.S. to act in ways not

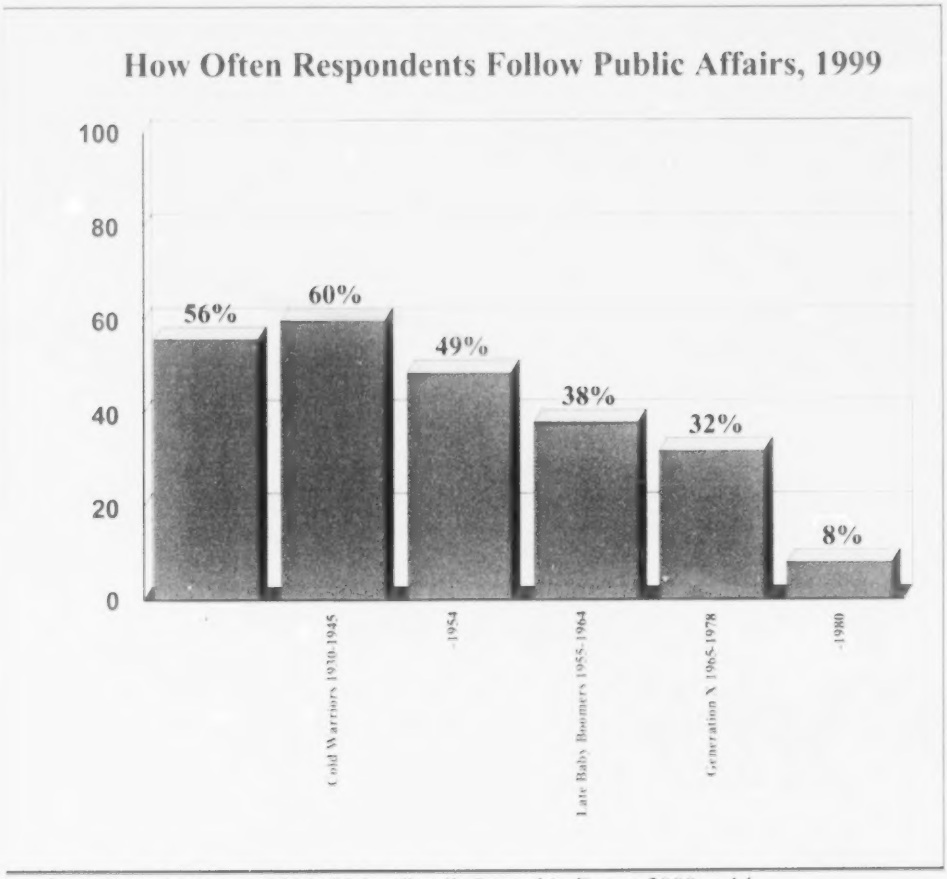
consistent with its national interest. Of twenty-three diverse knowledge questions, students' average response was 57% correct.[2] The knowledge gaps between the youngest age cohorts and older ones were greater than they were in the 1940s and 1950s, growing from 2.5% in the 1940s and 1950s to 19% in 1989 (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 172). Declines in knowledge then, have some generational basis.

Will Generations X and Y become better informed? We know from longitudinal studies of previous generations that over their life cycles, the answer could be yes. But over the past forty years, no generation has begun with such low levels of interest in politics. Cross-sectional surveys of incoming freshmen reveal that only 26% consider it very important or essential to keep up to date with political affairs. This is a near record low, in contrast to over 50% of students prior to 1970 and 42% in 1990 (The American Freshman: Thirty Year Trends 1997, 28).

In contrast to older American cohorts, on average Generations X and Y are much less interested in public affairs. While Generations X and Y mirror usual youthful avoidance, the cohort gap in attention to public affairs is greater than it was for previous cohorts (Bennett 2000, 21-22). Forty percent of Generation X and Y respondents reported they had not watched a national news broadcast on TV in the past week. Over one third (35%) reported that they had not read a daily newspaper in the past week (National Election Studies 2000). See Table 1.

[2] Using these questions, participants in the We the People… the Citizen and the Constitution national competition scored a mean of 81% correct, suggesting that effective civic education may provide a partial remedy for low levels of political knowledge (Soule 2001, 15).

Table 1



Pew Center's August 1999 "Values" poll. Quoted in Benett 2000, p.14.

Cross-sectional surveys do not allow us to separate generational from life-cycle effects. Panel studies show that civic engagement has a powerful life cycle dynamic (Jennings and Stoker 2001, 16). Retention of textbook knowledge may decline over the life cycle. However, data from one panel study show a continuity in knowledge levels that rivals that of party identification or salient issues positions (Jennings 1996).

Theories on knowledge suggest that "what one learns and remembers depends on what one already knows. Once a particular fact is learned, this knowledge serves as a context for new information— the hook upon which additional facts become caught

(Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 175). Learning political facts creates a context for both absorption and retention of new data. The lack of a sufficient knowledge base combined with a decline in interest may handicap this generation, even in it's peak participation years in middle age.

Political Participation

Political participation and knowledge affect each other reciprocally (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 186). Increases in one will lead to increases in the other. Knowledge is a "prerequisite to successful political engagement— that is, pursuing and defending one's interest in politics (Niemi and Junn 1998, 9). In turn, participation teaches citizens about politics and increases attentiveness in public affairs. Utilizing data from a variety of sources, the following section will explore political participation among Generations X and Y, and contrast that to older cohorts where possible. We lack data, however, to disentangle life cycle from generational effects (Jennings and Stoker 2001, 2).

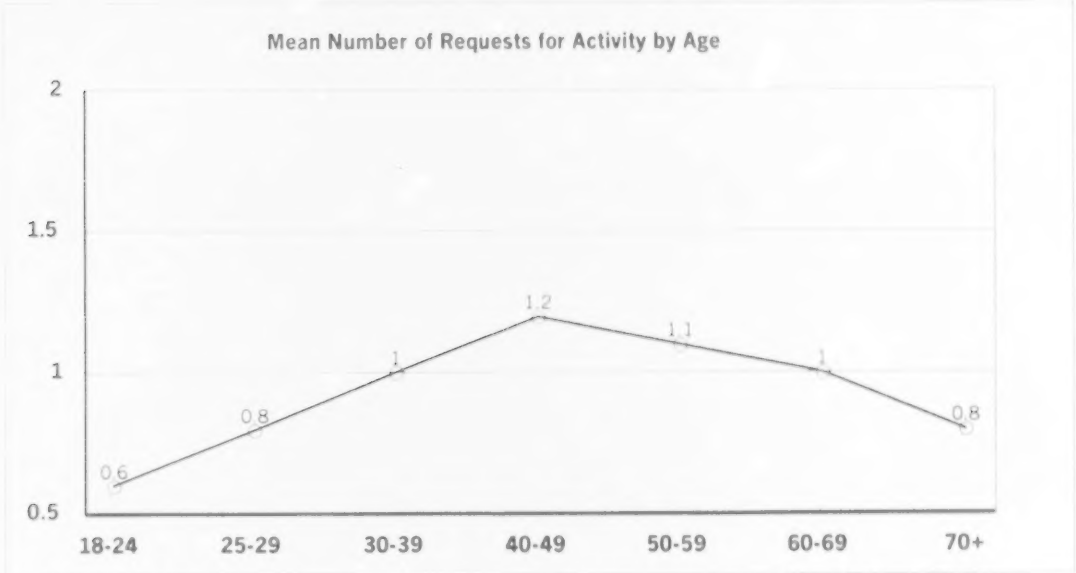
Previous research suggests that Generations X and Y are in part responsible for a portion of decline of social capital in the U.S. Generations X and Y possess individualistic orientations; taking part in public life and collective activities like politics is their lowest priority, behind having a close-knit family, gaining knowledge, education and skills, and developing a successful career (National Association of Secretaries of State 28). The decline in new citizens' participation has not been across the board for all activities. Volunteerism for instance is higher for this cohort, although we do not know whether the impetus is mandatory or political (Astin and Sax 1998).

While public-spirited and civic-minded Generation X + Yrs are volunteering in their communities, they are not discussing politics (Panetta Institute Survey, *New York Times*, 1-12-2000). Fourteen percent of young people born between 1970 and 1982 never discuss politics with family or friends (National Election Studies 2000). Young people who do not have regular discussions about politics are more likely to be African Americans, Hispanics, non-college bound, non-internet users, have less education, and are not registered to vote. Males are also slightly more likely to discuss politics (National Association of Secretaries of State, 36). This pattern reinforces existing inequalities. Individuals in Generations X and Y who enjoy high socioeconomic status, high levels of

education, and who are connected into a social network where they are likely to be asked to participate, are likely to participate at levels similar to previous cohorts (Verba, Brady and Schlozman 1995).

In their words: "I kind of feel alienated from politics and I think that's kind of the consensus… I'm too young to be involved in anything… plus, I have my own life. And politics is for old men— why get involved?" Another, "politics just really wasn't that important. So my parents didn't talk about it" (National Association of Secretaries of State, 40-41). Generations X and Y feel ignored by politicians, and this is true in part. Table 2 shows that eighteen to twenty-four year-olds receive the fewest requests to participate of all cohorts.

Table 2



Schlozman, Kay, Sidney Verba, Henry Brady, and Jennifer Erkulwater (1998). "Why Can't They Be Like We Were? Understanding the Generation Gap in Participation." Paper presented at APSA Task Force on Civic Education.

But politicians are also well aware that this group is less likely to participate. Only 9% of Generation X and Y respondents reported that they had telephoned, written a

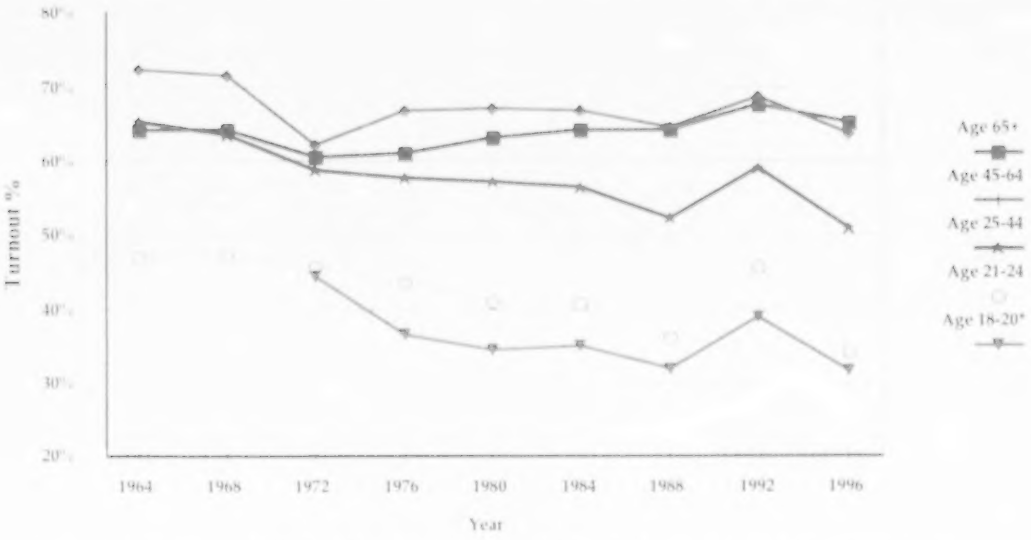
letter to, or visited a government official to express views on a public issue. Only 14.1% of NES respondents reported that they were very much interested in political campaigns in 2000 (National Election Studies 2000). Only 3% worked for a political party or candidate, protested or demonstrated. And, most important for politicians, only 48% of young people said they turned out to vote in the presidential election in 2000 (National Election Studies). This figure is probably lower, due to respondents' over reporting turnout. Off-year election turnout is about half that number.

Official estimates of voter turnout from 1960 suggest a general decline. However, measuring voting is not straightforward; official turnout estimates are based on vote counts divided by the census estimates of the voting age population. Research suggests that much of the decline in voting may be due to the increase in ineligible citizens among the voting age population in the denominator. Factoring in the increasing number of noncitizens (about 7 million of whom were not eligible to vote in 2000) and disenfranchisement as a result of current or past incarceration (about 3.9 million citizens in 1998) may correct for this error (Jankowski and Elder 2001,16 - 22). Subtracting those who are ineligible to vote, Table 3 shows clear generational differences that probably relate to the life cycle. Turnout began to decline around 1972 across nearly all ages except for those above sixty-five.[3]

[3] Jankowski and Elder suggest that increased voting rates among those over sixty-five is a result of improved health, economic status and successful mobilization by organizations like the American Association of Retired Persons (2001, 26).

Table 3

Eligible Citizen Turnout by Age Group, 1964-1996



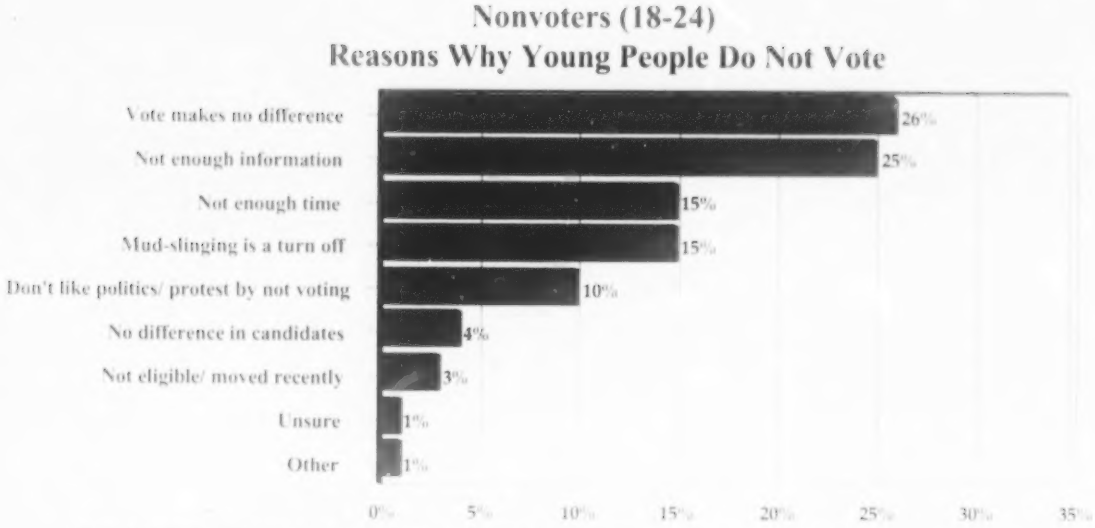
Junkowski, Thomas and Charles Elder. "Transforming the Puzzle Again: Age, Cohort, and Declining Turnout." Paper presented at 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

Why do young Americans vote at such low rates? Of those who did not vote, most cited their belief that their vote doesn't make a difference (Table 4). Second, they don't think they "have enough information on the candidates." They feel pressed for time and are turned off by negative campaigns. Some are voicing a protest by not voting. Others see no difference in candidates and still others are ineligible because of a change in address and subsequent failure to register.

Of those who voted (Table 5), most cited reasons relating to efficacy (to voice their opinions to make a difference, can't complain unless you vote, every vote counts). Second, out of a feeling of civic responsibility or duty. Third, to support or oppose a specific candidate or cause. Fourth, for no real reason or out of habit. Finally, for partisan reasons (National Association of Secretaries of State, 46). This coincides with other data that show 35% of all voters cast ballots out of a sense of obligation, the single most frequently mentioned reason in one poll (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition* 3-19-

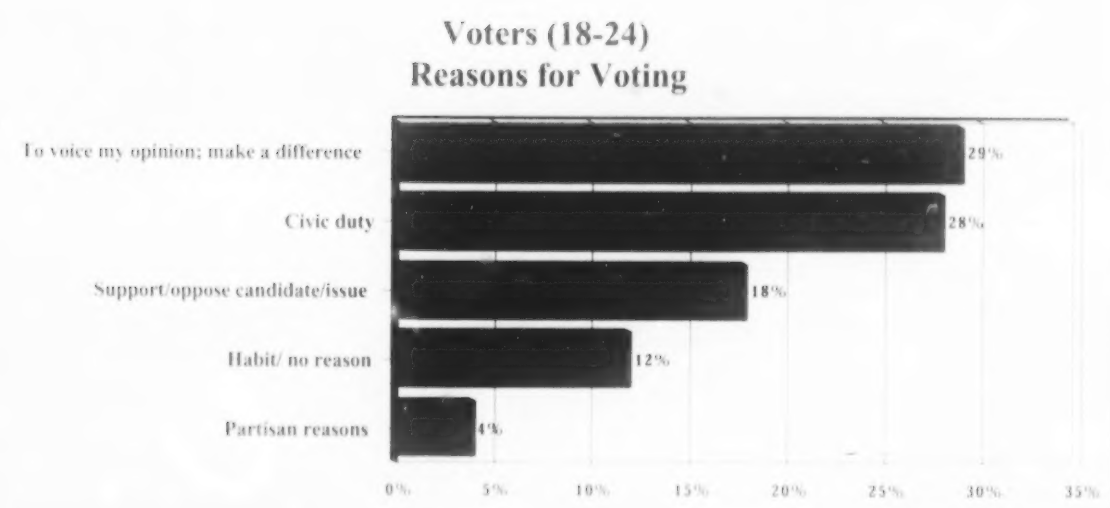
2001). Members of Generation Y who cited civic duty had parents who voted, were mostly white, had some college and were slightly more female (58%) (National Association of Secretaries of State, 47).

Table 4



"New Millennium Project," Part 1 (1999). National Association of Secretaries of State, p.46.

Table 5



"New Millennium Project," Part 1 (1999). National Association of Secretaries of State, p.46.

The puzzle of why young Americans turn out at such low rates is not fully understood. Investigating all the usual suspects (leaving home, being single, renting rather than owing a home, being employed) do not account for more than 6% of the gap between turnout of those aged 18-24 and those in their sixties (Highton and Wolfinger 2001, 207). They suggest that we should look at key experiences for people entering adulthood. For example, in contrast to previous generations, young Americans today have fewer opportunities to practice politics in high school student government. In the fourth wave of their panel study, Jennings and Stoker found that only 27% of the children, now aged 18-30, ran for elected office in school. Only 44% had served as an officer in a school organization. Participating in high school social organizations was found to increase civic engagement later in life, showing up most clearly in middle age (Jennings and Stoker 2001, 18).

Table 6 Extra-curricular Activities during High School

Parents and Generations X & Y

Activity	Parents 18 Years (in 1965)	Their Children Age 18-35 (in 1997)
Ran for an Elected Office in the School	50	27
Served as an Officer in a School Organization	63	44
Member of a School Athletic Team	38	66
Member of a School Musical Group	33	34
Member of a School Debate or Speech Club	4	11
Member of Other School Organization	73	62
Member of a Non-School Youth Organization	88	41
Overall Index of Extracurricular Activities	3.3	2.9

Note: In all but the last row, cell entries are the percentage taking part in the named activity. The last row gives the average on the index of extracurricular activities. The third generation analysis excluded youth less than 18 years old. The base Ns are 935 for G2 and 681 for G3.

Jennings, Kent, and Laura Stoker (1991). "Generations and Civic Engagement: A Longitudinal Multiple-Generation Analysis." Paper delivered at the 2001 American Political Science Association Convention, San Francisco, p. 22.

Generations X and Y know little about political parties. They came of age in an era of declining partisanship among all citizens and of candidate-centered elections. However, clear ideological gaps have opened up between boys and girls that should be of interest to political parties. Young women favor more state intervention to provide a social safety net. For instance, 70% of high school aged girls and 63% of voting age women agree that the government should help families get ahead, compared to 54% of high school boys and men (National Association of Secretaries of State, 48). This gap is also apparent in surveys of college freshmen. While both groups have become more conservative, young men have moved further to the right and a wider gender gap is now visible.

Table 7

Astin, Alexander W., Sarah A. Parrot, William S. Korn, Linda J. Sax (1997). *The American Freshman: Thirty Year Trends, 1966-1996*, p.11.

Young people care about different issues than do older Americans. In a 2000 survey of Generation Y, the issue most often mentioned was protecting the environment (49%). Next came providing health care to the uninsured (46%), followed by working to reduce racial tensions (46%), and strengthening gun control laws (45%). Women (55%) and blacks (79%) were much more likely to see this as a top priority. In contrast, the current administration has focused on cutting taxes, regulating health maintenance organizations, and adding prescription drug benefits to Medicare coverage ("Y Vote 2000: Politics Meets The Digital Generation," 2000, 11-15).

Attitudes and Values

Low rates of information and political participation have reciprocal relationships related to attitudes and values. Declines in political knowledge and participation are both caused by and in turn change attitudes and values. These declines correlate with increasing frustration levels of the American public. American frustration levels with government have increased over the life spans of Generations X and Y. One part of this frustration is due to fundamental misunderstanding of the diversity of values in this country. While individuals and generations do not agree on which societal problems are most pressing, let alone how to solve them, most Americans see their own attitudes as reasonable. They also assume that other reasonable people must share them. Thirty-nine percent said "most" Americans would agree with their position; only 19% said "very few" people agree (Hibbing 2000, 8). This false belief in consensus leads to a level of frustration with the inefficiency of democracy. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents nationwide agreed that it would be better if "elected officials would stop talking and just take action" (Hibbing 2000, 9). Sixty percent thought "compromise is just selling out one's principles" (9).

Trust and confidence in political institutions reached their lowest levels during the lifespan of Generations X and Y. Correspondingly, 64% of young people agree that "government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, not for the benefit of all," and 57% think "you can't trust politicians because most are dishonest" (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999, 20). Social trust, a key component in social capital and civic engagement declined sharply for Generations X and Y (Jennings and

Stoker 2001, 4). See Table 8. In contrast to their parents, there average scores are nearly one-third less trusting. A minimum of social trust is necessary for collective action.

Table 8 Social Trust across Time and Generations

Question wording	Generation (n)	1965	1973	1982	1997
Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?*	First (884)	69	65	60	----
	Second (916)	65	59	63	64
	Third (768)	----	----	----	37
Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?**	First (879)	71	64	64	----
	Second (916)	63	56	62	74
	Third (768)	----	----	----	50
Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?***	First (875)	82	78	76	----
	Second (916)	75	70	70	79
	Third (767)	----	----	----	47
Overall Social Trust Index****	First (855)	.76	.70	.68	----
	Second (877)	.69	.62	.66	.73
	Third (762)	----	----	----	.45

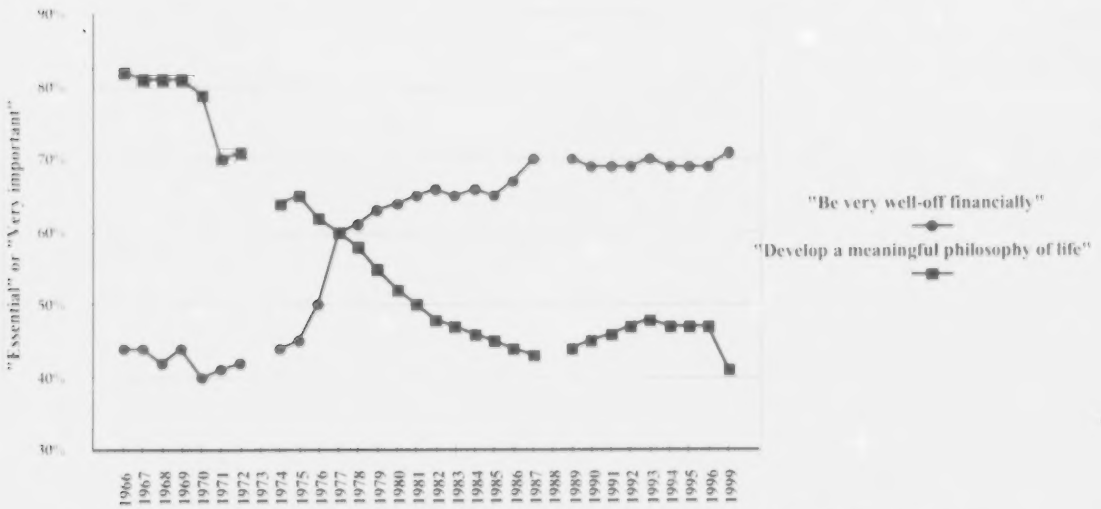
* Entries are percent: can be trusted
** Entries are percent: try to be helpful
*** Entries are percent: try to be fair
**** Entries are averages on the 0-1 Index

Jennings, Kent M., and Laura Stoker (2001). "Generations and Civic Engagement: A Longitudinal Multiple-Generation Analysis" Paper delivered at the 2001 American Political Science Association Convention, San Francisco, p. 32.

This generation is, on average, less idealistic. In contrast to the most idealistic generation in the last forty years (college freshmen in the late 1960s), this cohort is very different. In the late 1960s, more than 80% of college freshmen endorsed "the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life" as their top value. "The importance of being very well off financially" ranked fifth or sixth. These two values have switched places: the top value is now being very well-off financially (71%). Developing a meaningful philosophy of life now occupies sixth place (41%) (American Freshman 1966-1996, and 1999, 13). This is a generation that values self-fulfillment (75%) above patriotism (55%), religion (53%) or money (48%), but appears prepared to work hard (87%) to achieve financial success (Wall Street Journal, 7/6/98).

Table 9

Meaningful philosophy of life or financially well off?



Astin, Alexander W., Sarah A. Parrott, William S. Korn, Linda J. Sax. (1997). *The American Freshman: Thirty Year Trends, 1966-1996*, p. 13

Concern for financial security is also a reflection of growing income inequality in the U.S. In 1998 the Census Bureau released a report showing that since 1973, every group in society except the top 20% has seen its share of the national income decline, with the bottom 20% losing the most (from 4.4% of the national income to 3.6%). Nearly

a quarter of incoming college students report some or a very good likelihood of working full-time while attending college, in contrast to 16% of their peers in 1982. More women than men (70% to 57%) are concerned that they will not have enough money to complete college (American Freshman 1999, 2). Credit card companies offer cards to teenagers, and the results for Generations Y and X have been predictably disastrous. More than 615,000 people under 35 filed for bankruptcy in 2000, up 40% since 1991 (Harvard Law Studies, Salon 4/12/2001). This "Generation in Debt" is likely to become more so, due to the collapse of the dot.com industry, the new bill granting credit card companies bankruptcy protection, and last-hired, first-fired practices.

Conclusion

The data presented in this paper provide some basis for the charge that youth bear responsibility for part of the decline in social capital in America. The data presented here demonstrate that there are some significant differences between Generations X and Y and previous generations. On average, these Generations X and Y possess less information about public affairs. Their understanding of what it means to be a citizen in a democracy is shallow, and emphasizes rights rather than responsibilities. In contrast to previous generations, Generations X and Y are less interested in politics. They pay less attention to news. It is likely that this will change over their life cycles, but no generation measured in the last forty years began at such a low level. Given the low starting point, how much will their interest in and attention to the political process increase?

Despite increases in volunteering, Generations X and Y participate in politics at lower rates than older cohorts. Since knowledge and participation are in some ways reciprocal, low levels of participation decrease opportunities for both personal empowerment as well as influence (Bobo and Gillian 1990, 307). Members of Generation X and Y discuss politics less frequently. They turnout to vote at less than half the rate of the most active cohorts. Not surprisingly, campaigning politicians largely ignore issues of importance to youth. Low levels of participation might not matter in the short term if public policy concerns were the same across generations. But they are not. Youth have a more "liberal agenda" than that being pursued by congress. Interestingly, a gender gap

has opened up where young women are more in favor of a social safety net than are young men.

The decline in political participation has been uneven. It is greatest among those with less education, less money and fewer connections. This pattern mirrors existing inequalities. If low participation by these groups continues, it will recreate these inequalities.

Generations X and Y came of age during an era of mistrust and frustration with the political process. The majority thinks that government is run by special interests and that most politicians are dishonest. Their levels of social trust are strikingly low in contrast to their parents. Generations X and Y have responded to the increasing income inequality and debt among young Americans by valuing financial security above other values. Becoming financially well-off has become the top value for American freshmen.

Will these patterns hold as Generations X and Y mature? Previous studies show significant increases in political engagement over the life cycle, with some decline toward in later years. The data presented here captured Generations X and Y at the low point of their projected life cycle of political engagement. Personal concerns or world events may stir up these cohorts to inform themselves and to participate in the political process. More studies, especially longitudinal, are needed to determine which factors will motivate Generations X and Y to engage in politics. Data on young Americans is scant due to their small numbers in nationally representative samples.

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